
CHAPTER ONE: MAPPING THE SOURCES OF TENSION WITH REGIONAL DIMENSIONS

- SOURCES OF TENSION IN AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN:
A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Zahid Hussain

- MAPPING THE SOURCES OF TENSION AND THE
INTERESTS OF REGIONAL POWERS IN AFGHANISTAN
AND PAKISTAN

Emma Hooper & Juan Garrigues

SOURCES OF TENSION IN AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Zahid Hussain

Journalist and writer

As the war in Afghanistan enters its eleventh year, there is no clear end in sight.

What started as a military intervention to punish the Taliban regime for hosting Al-Qaeda, which was responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, has escalated into a wider regional conflict, with Afghanistan now at the centre of a new “Great Game”. Pakistan, India, and Iran are vying for influence in the strife-torn country, as the West struggles to broker an endgame to the war in Afghanistan.

It is quite evident that the coalition forces are not on course for defeating the Taliban militarily, even with 150,000 troops installed in the country. Despite spending billions of dollars a year on military operations alone and ever-increasing allied casualties, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces have failed to prevent Taliban insurgents from controlling a large swath of Pashtun dominated eastern and southern Afghanistan.

The United States (US) and its allies have endorsed a plan for the Afghan government to take charge of security in the country by 2014. This optimism is premised on the assumption that the Afghan security forces would be ready to take over by that time, and that regional support will prop up Afghan stability. But the increasingly perilous situation on the ground gives little hope of achieving that objective. The expectation that a weak administration in Kabul will be able to transform Afghanistan into a stable state by 2014 and take over border and internal security responsibility is unrealistic at best.

Recent offensives by the Taliban and a series of audacious attacks targeting American and NATO installations in Kabul indicate the insurgents are much more powerful and more organised than at any time since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The new U.S. counterinsurgency strategy has shown little sign of success despite the 2010 surge in troops. There is now a growing realisation among all parties that the war may not end in defeat for either side, but in some sort of political settlement with the insurgents, which would require direct talks with the Taliban.

Zahid Hussain is the author of Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam (2007) and The Scorpion's Tail: The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan (2010). He is currently a scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC.

There is also a serious concern that withdrawal of foreign forces without any negotiated political mechanism in place, would not only plunge Afghanistan into a fierce contest over territory and population by various tribal groups and factions, but also draw the surrounding regional countries deeper into the conflict. A major challenge for the alliance therefore is how to wind down the war, reducing violence, while also preventing a wider regional conflict. Ending the war simply will not be possible without a power-sharing agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, followed by an accord that includes the support of regional players with a legitimate stake in Afghanistan's future.

The Role of Regional Interests

Without a sustainable agreement among surrounding countries guaranteeing Afghanistan's security and its neutrality, the country may turn into the centre of a bloody proxy war, with different actors each supporting rival factions across ethnic and sectarian lines. Such an agreement is also critical to prevent Afghanistan from reverting to a hub of global *jihad*. A land-locked country, Afghanistan shares borders with six countries, all of whom have a history of involvement in the country. Particularly Pakistan, with 1,500-mile long borders with Afghanistan and the war spilling over into its territory, has had much deeper links there and remains key to the resolution of the Afghan crisis. But other surrounding nations like Iran, China, Central Asia, Russia and India are also important to achieving a sustainable peace in the region. These countries may have varying interests and regard the actions of others suspiciously, but they each have a huge stake in Afghanistan's stability.

The overarching lessons of the regenerating insurgency and the subsequent failure of the allied forces to contain the ever-spreading militancy are absolutely clear: a negotiated political settlement intertwined with a regional approach is the only endgame. To be sure, a political settlement will be extremely difficult to achieve. There is even a question as to whether the Taliban are even prepared at this point to talk without an agreement on some sort of ceasefire.

Whilst some connections with Taliban groups have been established through different channels, there has not yet been any significant progress in the negotiations. Secret meetings were held in early 2011 in Germany and Qatar between a former private secretary of Mullah Omar and senior US officials. Facilitated by the German government, the preliminary talks collapsed after the identity of the Taliban interlocutor was leaked to the press. Similar contacts with the insurgents by the United Nations (UN) also failed to make any headway. Similarly, President Karzai's initiative to reach out to the Taliban experienced a serious setback after the assassination of the government's chief negotiator Burhanuddin Rabbani, and suffered further with the downturn in Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan.

A Plan Without a Strategy

The underlying problem is therefore that the Western allies may have an exit plan, but there is no coherent strategy in place that could

lead to an orderly transition in Afghanistan. As a result the much touted reconciliation process has yet to take off the ground. For negotiation to turn into a viable exit strategy, concrete steps need to be taken that include calling for a ceasefire, establishing a timeline for withdrawal of most foreign troops and creating a transitional political mechanism. These steps are the only way to move towards a solution to the Afghan conundrum.

The complexities of an exit plan have been further compounded by the competing interests among the surrounding countries and divergent strategic priorities of the United States. There may be a consensus among the surrounding nations and regional players to help the NATO forces leave Afghanistan, but there is a huge division over the mechanism to use. Most of the neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, Iran and China, are wary of the US plan to maintain permanent military bases in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Iran shares a 560-mile border with western Afghanistan and has historical business and cultural ties with the people there. Tehran maintains cordial relations with the Karzai government, but longstanding hostility between Iran and the United States remains a major problem in the way of a regional accord. More important for Iran, however, is that stability in Afghanistan would make it easier for foreign forces to leave Afghanistan. Iran's concern about narcotics traffic from Afghanistan and its plans to expand trade to Central Asia are also a reason for Tehran to cooperate with the West in the efforts to bring an end to the war in Afghanistan. But there is also Western apprehension about Iranian motives and its deep involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

Of all the neighbouring countries, China may currently have the least direct influence on Afghanistan, but its growing economic interests in the country make it an important stakeholder in regional security. With a 3.5 billion-dollar investment in copper mining, China is the largest single foreign direct investor in Afghanistan. It is also involved in an ambitious infrastructure development plan that includes construction of a power plant and a freight railway in the country. Beijing supports the Karzai government, but it would not endorse permanent foreign military bases in its neighbourhood.

Whilst the Central Asian states may not have the power to influence development in Afghanistan, their mutual historical linkages and ethnic and cultural proximity make them important regional players. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are also important routes for supplies to the NATO forces in Afghanistan. As compared to Pakistan and Iran, however, the Central Asian nations remain – at this point - peripheral, but their security is also threatened by the instability in Afghanistan.

However, the issues most seriously affecting the Afghan endgame are: (i) those of militant sanctuaries in Pakistani tribal areas; (ii) a stubborn rivalry between India and Pakistan; and (iii) the continuing stalemate between Kabul and Islamabad. These are the fault lines that are the major source of tension and which need to be addressed for a sustainable peace in the region.

(i) Pakistan's Conundrum

Pakistan's role is perhaps the most critical in determining the course of the Afghan endgame. While its cooperation is key to the winding down of the war, its geographical proximity and ethnic and political linkages across the border also enable Pakistan to play a spoiler's role.

Ironies abound in the alliance between the West and Pakistan that has emerged since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While being a critical ally in the war on terror, Pakistan has also been described as an epicentre of Islamic militancy and *jihadi* terrorism causing serious threat to regional and global security. Pakistan serves as the major logistical line for NATO forces in Afghanistan (more than 75 percent of the supplies to the coalition forces go through Pakistan), but its lawless tribal regions provide safe havens for the Taliban insurgency and its logistical supply lines. That has placed Pakistan in the unique situation of having strong leverage over both sides of the war, despite this dichotomy having also been a major cause of conflict between the US-led coalition forces and Islamabad.

Mired in this mutual mistrust, the two sides have substantial differences of opinion about the appropriate strategy in Afghanistan and how to deal with the wider insurgency. Pakistan is reluctant to support any solution that does not protect its interest in Afghanistan or that provides for a nonaligned setup in Kabul with a dominant role for Pashtuns, pitching it at odds with the Western allies and the Afghan government. Meanwhile, Pakistan's ambivalence about cracking down on the militants in the tribal territories is seen as one of the reasons for the reversal in the war in Afghanistan.

Since the start of the war in Afghanistan, the remote tribal areas on Pakistan's border have become home to a lethal brew of Al-Qaeda operatives, both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and *jihadists* from across the globe. These tribal areas are known as the seven autonomous federally administered tribal areas, or FATA. Several outlawed Pakistani militant groups now operate from these territories, and the remote mountainous regions have become the main bases for the training of insurgents fighting on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border.

North Waziristan, one of Pakistan's seven semi-autonomous tribal regions along the border of Afghanistan, has been a major hub for the aforementioned Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents. The largest group of fighters is associated with the *Haqqani* network, led by legendary former Afghan *Mujahideen* commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin. Their strong connections with Al-Qaeda have made the network the most dangerous insurgent faction in Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, the network remains a useful hedge against an uncertain outcome in Afghanistan. The deep reluctance to take action against the *Haqqani* network is a reflection of Pakistan's worries about the events that will transpire after the eventual pull out of foreign forces from Afghanistan. The Pakistani military establishment is convinced that a renewed civil war will break out, if NATO forces leave Afghanistan without a negotiated political settlement. Under that scenario, the Pashtun-dominated Afghan Taliban and *Haqqani* network could be used

again by Pakistan as a proxy force for exercising control over Afghan government and countering Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan is another safe haven of Taliban insurgents.

It is widely believed that most of the Taliban leadership known as the Quetta *Shura*, including the spiritual leader of the movement Mullah Mohammed Omar, have their command and control system in Quetta, the provincial capital. Scores of Afghan refugee camps were set up in Balochistan almost three decades ago, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and they have become centres of recruitment for the Taliban. Afghans now constitute almost 30 percent of Quetta's population of 1.7 million. The issue of the insurgent safe havens in Pakistan has become increasingly volatile with the escalation in militant violence in Afghanistan, causing serious concern to the NATO forces.

Pakistan, however, does not have as much leverage over the Quetta *Shura* as over the *Haqqani* network. Mullah Omar has independently approved contacts with the Karzai government and his representative has also been engaged in secret negotiations. The arrest in 2010 of Mullah Baradar, a senior Taliban commander, underscores the growing strains between the Pakistani military establishment and the Quetta *Shura*. It is also the reason why Pakistan has been aggressively pushing for the inclusion of the *Haqqani* network in the negotiations. But it is highly unlikely that *Haqqanis* who owe their allegiance to Mullah Omar would go their separate way.

The Implications of Continued Instability

The implications for Pakistan of continued instability in Afghanistan, however, could be drastic.

The decade-long war in Afghanistan has had devastating effects on Pakistan, turning the country into a new battleground for Al-Qaeda linked militants. Thousands of Pakistani civilians and military personnel have been killed in the wave of terrorist attacks and in the fighting against the insurgents in the country's northwestern areas. The economic and political cost of the war has also been huge, threatening to completely destabilise the country with catastrophic consequences for global security.

Having returned to democracy less than four years ago, Pakistan faces the additional, daunting prospect of a creeping military coup. The powerful military has already taken charge of the country's national security and foreign policy, a development that certainly does not bode well for the preservation of a nascent democratic process.

A weak government and its civilian leaders have proven unable to deal with the grave political, economic and security challenges. The country, with more than 100 nuclear weapons and an army half a million strong, has descended into near-chaos. The worsening economic situation has fuelled growing discontent among the population, providing an even more conducive environment for the continuing rise of militancy and religious extremism. Pakistan is sitting on a powder keg and the fragmentation of the country has become a real possibility.

A Pashtun War?

A major fault in the approach to the war has been the failure to understand the extent to which this is not only an Afghan war, or only a war against Islamic extremists, but also a Pashtun war. It is ethnic Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border who have taken the lead in the insurgency. And now a distinctive Pakistani Taliban movement known as *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) has evolved, seeking to enforce a draconian Islamic rule not only in the tribal areas, but also in the neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier) Province.

Both the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban movements are predominantly Pashtun movements. A major force behind recruitment has been the belief that the war in Afghanistan was directed against Pashtuns, a view that was reinforced by the installation of the Northern Alliance, predominantly comprising minority Tajik, Uzbeks and Hazara, into power in Kabul in 2001. This move both intensified long-standing ethnic animosities and alienated the predominantly Pashtun southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, which are now the stronghold of the insurgency.

No effort has been made by the US-led allied forces to alleviate the Pashtun grievances in Afghanistan. Instead they were treated as the enemy. These are the same Pashtun tribesmen who fought the Soviet Army two decades ago, and they will not give up this fight any more readily now, than they did then.

As the recent insurgency in Pakistan has escalated, it has grown in both numbers and sophistication. The Pashtun insurgents in the tribal areas have been joined by several other Pakistani militant groups and have formed an increasingly interconnected and coordinated web, with close collaboration with Al-Qaeda.

Children of Opportunity & Deprivation

Furthermore, there is a new generation of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, which comprises primarily Pakistanis (rather than the previous mainly foreign fighters). This includes a flood of new recruits from the well-educated urban middle class, youth, professionals, doctors, engineers and retired military officers, who have brought an increasing sophistication to militant operations on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders. Children of opportunity rather than deprivation, they have been the masterminds behind many of the terrorist attacks in the country. This new generation of militants, products of elite secular educational institutions rather than religious schools or *madrassas*, is strongly committed to the cause of global *jihad* and has acted as a magnet for radicalised Muslims across the world.

Then there are others, children of deprivation from the poverty stricken rural areas, lured into *jihad* in the name of religion. Poverty makes them ripe targets for recruitment. Many of them are picked up from radical *madrassas* and easily brainwashed to sacrifice their lives fighting against "enemies of Islam". Some of them, as young as 12 years old, end up becoming suicide bombers.

The militants have now infiltrated new terrain, far from the mountainous territories. They have turned the country's largest province, Punjab, into their new battleground, launching a series of bloody suicide bombings and sophisticated attacks on the urban centers of Lahore, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, the army headquarters. Infiltrating deep into the major cities, the groups have divided into small terrorist cells, making them more difficult to track down.

A dangerous nexus has emerged among Punjab-based, outlawed, Pakistani militant groups like the *Jaish-e-Mohammed*, *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*, which operate from the tribal region, and from Al-Qaeda, presenting a serious challenge to the security agencies. Emboldened by the government's ambivalent efforts to counter the militant threat, Islamic radicals have stepped up their propaganda war, widely distributing video cassettes of Taliban killings and speeches of their leaders. *Jihadi* literature is distributed freely, despite the government's ban.

"Good" & "Bad" Militants

A major failure on the part of Pakistan has been not to recognise the severity of the threat posed by the homegrown militant groups. Despite the rise in extremist violence in the country the government and the military refuse to crack down on the militant groups, who continue to operate with impunity. Organisations like *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, which was responsible for the 2008 terrorist attacks on the Indian city of Mumbai, are still being patronised by the Pakistani military and intelligence services. The policy of making a distinction between "good militants" and "bad militants" has been a major factor contributing to the rising violent extremism in Pakistan. This policy of appeasement towards religious extremism threatens to push Pakistan to a civil war.

Additionally, there has been a failure to understand that combating the militant threat requires something far more than a military campaign. It requires a comprehensive counter terrorism strategy as well as strong political leadership. Both have been sorely lacking.

Consequently, whether or not even the combined ground operations by Pakistani troops and the U.S. drone campaign can ultimately dislodge the insurgents from their strongholds in the remote regions and urban centers and defeat them is very much an open question.

The U.S. strategy for fighting the insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is premised on rooting out the militants from territory after territory, steadily taking decisive control, and assassinating their leadership to weaken the groups' operations. But the decapitation policy has thus far failed to make significant headway in either rooting out the insurgency, or stopping the attacks.

In Pakistan, even the major military offensives have resulted in only questionable gains, while stoking the fire of new recruitment to the groups and driving them into new strongholds in more formidable tribal territory—the most remote of the border regions, North Waziristan—and into the country's heartland.

A key flaw in Pakistan's strategy in the fight against the insurgency is that it has failed to account for the ability of the groups to regenerate. The government has failed to put in place an effective administration and policing system after successful military operations driving out the militants from Swat valley and some other parts of north western Pakistan, leaving the people under perpetual threat of the insurgents coming back.

Their fear is justified. The militants have shown themselves capable of regrouping and striking back. The killing of their senior leaders has little effect on their operations. The Pakistani military has now deployed 100,000 troops in the effort to root out the militants. Yet, despite the increased deployment, militant attacks have resumed in some of the areas that were thought to be cleared. The threat represented by the insurgency has grown so severe that the stability of the Pakistani state is now seriously in question.

Fuelling Insurgency?

The U.S drone strikes in the tribal region have been another factor in fuelling insurgency in Pakistan. The most aggressive operation that the CIA has been involved in to date has killed several senior Al-Qaeda operatives and thrown the terrorist network into disarray. But the success of the campaign, and the larger success and wisdom of the current US Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy remain questionable.

For the first time in history an intelligence agency of one country has been using predators to target individuals for killing in another country with which it is not officially at war. No mention has ever been made publicly by either U.S. or Pakistani authorities of the drone strikes themselves or the collateral damage and its political cost. As the strikes have caused an increasing number of civilian deaths, including those of many women and children, public anger has surged. The strikes have also spurred a significant rise in the number of recruits joining the militant groups, in part because according to tribal code, the families of the drones' victims are required to seek revenge.

The United States needs to re-evaluate its policy of using drones as a major tool to fight militants in Pakistan's tribal region, as it has fuelled rather than suppressed the insurgency. The political cost of the drone strikes far exceeds the tactical gains. There are also legal and ethical questions involved in the killing of people just on suspicion of being terrorists.

(iii) India-Pakistan Rivalry: The Battle for Influence

What is widely perceived as a rapidly diminishing commitment by the West to the Afghan war has also intensified Pakistan's long-standing struggle with India for supremacy of influence in Afghanistan. The resolution of the Afghan war is becoming deeply entangled in the prolonged rivalry between Islamabad and New Delhi. The Pakistani military establishment views the expanding Indian presence in its "backyard" as a serious threat to their country's own security.

Historically, India has shared close cultural and political ties with Afghanistan and maintained cordial relations with successive governments in Kabul until the emergence of Taliban rule in 1996. Like most countries, India never recognised the Islamic emirates and had actively backed anti-Taliban resistance, and the Northern Alliance comprising Tajik, Uzbek and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups.

The US-led military action following the 9/11 terrorist attacks led to the India-Afghanistan alliance, which opened up massive opportunity for India to rebuild its influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Indian cultural influence in Afghanistan is very deep-rooted and has become its greatest asset in boosting its “soft” power.

Since 2001, India has moved aggressively - and successfully - to expand its political and economic influence in Afghanistan. It has ploughed close to US \$ 2 billion in economic and military assistance to the Karzai government, making it the largest regional donor to the country. The trade between the two countries has also increased many folds over since 2001.

Indian companies are now involved in building highways and other important infrastructure projects along the border, and have implemented some 50 development projects, including a highway to Iran and transmission line to Uzbekistan. There are currently 4,000 to 5,000 Indian workers and security personnel working on scores of high profile development projects across Afghanistan. For India, Afghanistan is also a potential route to access Central Asian markets and to meet its increasing energy demand.

Afghanistan’s strategic partnership agreement with India in October 2011, involving New Delhi in the training of Afghan security forces, has reinforced Pakistan’s apprehension. It is the first time Kabul has signed such a pact with another country.

India’s involvement in Afghanistan is, however, extremely sensitive because of its delicate - and often deadly - power game in South Asia. India’s interest in Afghanistan is not just to help rebuild the war-torn country, but also to counter Pakistan’s ambition to gain influence there. Islamabad’s anxiety over the expanding influence of its arch foe over the country’s western borders therefore does not come as a surprise.

Since their inception as separate, independent countries six decades ago, the two South Asian rivals have fought directly or indirectly for influence in Kabul. Pakistan actively supported Afghan *Mujahideen* resistance against the Soviet occupation and then supported the Taliban in the quest for a strategic depth in Afghanistan that might be helpful in the event of a war with India. Pakistan’s policy has therefore been to help establish a friendly Pashtun Islamic regime in Afghanistan that would keep India away.

Unsurprisingly, the expanding Indian presence in Afghanistan is seen by the Pakistani security establishment as a strategic defeat and has compounded Islamabad’s fears of being encircled. A major worry for Pakistan, therefore, is how to defend both its eastern and western borders as India and Afghanistan become increasingly close.

Some of Pakistan's security concerns are legitimate, but the fears of encirclement verge on paranoia. This has resulted in Pakistan's continuing patronage of some Afghan Taliban factions, such as the *Haqqani* network, which it considers a vital tool for countering Indian influence, even at the risk of Islamabad's strategic relationship with Washington.

For a long time, Pakistan has accused India of using its consulate offices in Afghanistan's border cities for espionage and of stirring up separatist insurgency in the western province of Balochistan. The Baloch, who are second largest ethnic group living on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, have carried out at least five major insurgencies since the creation of Pakistan in 1947 in pursuit of their demand for autonomy. They were all brutally suppressed by the Pakistani military. The latest uprising erupted in 2005 after Pakistani military forces killed Nawab Akber Khan Bugti, one of the most powerful tribal chieftains. Many of the Baloch insurgency leaders operate from sanctuaries in Afghanistan, causing tension between Islamabad and Kabul.

This struggle for influence took a more vicious turn in 2008 when the *Haqqani* network carried out a car bomb attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul, allegedly on the instruction of the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, killing more than 50 people. The incident gave a new and more violent turn to the ongoing proxy war between the two countries. Indian nationals, working on various development projects, have also been attacked by the Taliban insurgents.

India has a vital interest in Afghanistan for the same reasons as the rest of the international community: to prevent it from reverting to a safe haven for terrorists. Under the former Taliban rule, Afghanistan had become a training ground for militants who fought against Indian forces in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir. India favours a regional agreement that would not only protect its interests, but also prevent the unraveling of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces.

For a sustainable resolution of the Afghan crisis, it is thus imperative to address Pakistan's legitimate security concerns. But asking for India to leave Afghanistan or to exclude it from a regional agreement may not be acceptable to either the US or Afghanistan: India is important for the United States, because it shares the US antipathy towards the return of Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Who Holds the Key to Stability in Afghanistan – Islamabad or Delhi?

Pakistan views the current US approach as a tilt towards India and therefore sees no strategic advantage in eliminating Taliban safe havens on its territory, or in acting in full cooperation with the coalition forces. The devastating attacks launched by Pakistan-based groups, like the *Haqqani* network, are aimed at sending a clear message that Islamabad, not Delhi, holds the key to stability in Afghanistan.

To be sure, Pakistan would not be fully committed to fighting Afghan insurgents until its own insecurities towards India are addressed.

It is also important that the international community, particularly the United States, help resolve the outstanding disputes that remain the main cause of conflict between India and Pakistan.

There is a need to reassure Islamabad that India would not figure in its bilateral relations with Kabul. Pakistan and India should also be encouraged to evolve a bilateral mechanism to discuss and resolve their differences over the Afghan issue. Continued struggle for influence between them would only make it more difficult to establish peace in Afghanistan, with serious long-term consequences for the entire region.

(iii) Pakistan-Afghanistan: Antagonism & Stalemate

Another fault line undermining the prospect of sustainable peace in the region is the increasingly antagonistic relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The escalating tension on the Pakistani-Afghan borders is a serious cause of concern, as the 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of NATO forces approaches. Cross-border raids and the recent assassinations of a number of senior Afghan officials including former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani - allegedly by Pakistan-based Taliban insurgents - have pushed back the efforts to normalise the relations between Kabul and Islamabad, which had gained some momentum under the elected government in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the attacks on Pakistani security forces by the militants taking shelter across the border in Afghanistan have also heightened the tension between the two countries.

Of all the countries in the region, only Pakistan has had a major and contentious territorial dispute with Afghanistan. The two neighbouring Muslim countries have never had friendly ties, except for a brief period when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. But the relations have hit a new low with the war in Afghanistan getting bloodier. There is a long history of both Afghanistan and Pakistan providing sanctuaries to the other's insurgents, which has fuelled hostility between the two neighbours.

While some elements of friction between Kabul and Islamabad are rooted in the policy pursued during the British colonial period, the four decades of wars and civil strife in Afghanistan as well as regional rivalries have further complicated the relationship.

Mostly though, it is the longstanding border dispute, which has been the major cause of tension between the two nations. Afghanistan has never recognised the Durand line as an international border and instead lays claim on Pakistan's Pashtun areas.

The Durand Line

The Durand line was drawn in 1893 as a frontier between British India and Afghanistan. It also brought a swath of tribal land (now part of Pakistan) under British control. The demarcation also effectively divided the Pashtun population in half, thus sowing the seeds for a permanent conflict. Some 35 million Pashtuns live in Pakistan, representing 15 to

20 percent of the country's population, whilst in Afghanistan they are the largest ethnic group, comprising almost half of the country's 30 million population.

The Pakistani side of the Durand Line includes the provinces of Balochistan, North West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and FATA. The Afghan side of the border extends from Nuristan province in the northeast to Nimroz province in the southwest.

People on both sides of the border consider the Durand line as a "soft border", across which it is their right to move freely. This has also been the reason for Pakistan being drawn into Afghan conflicts.

Even the Pakistan-friendly Taliban regime refused to recognise the Durand Line as an international boundary. Afghan President Karzai once called the Durand Line "a line of hatred which raised a wall between the two brothers."

The Durand line may not be a hot issue at the moment, but it continues to flare up whenever Pakistan suggests fencing or mining it to stop cross border insurgent movement. The opposition comes not only from the Afghan government, but also from tribesmen on the Pakistani side.

The Tribal Cauldron

The security challenges of the Pakistani tribal areas lie at the heart of a wider threat to regional and global stability. Pakistan's battle for control over the lawless region has assumed much greater importance with the approach of the Afghan endgame.

Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal regions have for a long time remained major centres of cross border tension, as they share a 600-kilometre frontier with Afghanistan. The ungovernable borderland separates Pakistan and Afghanistan and the ethnic Pashtuns on both sides, who have long despised and ignored the dividing Durand line. With a population of more than four million comprised mostly of Pashtun tribes, the area straddling the Durand line has become a major battleground for Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups since the US invasion of Afghanistan.

The Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) is divided into seven agencies or administrative units with a total area of 2,700 kilometres, which include Bajaur, Momand, Khyber, Orakzai, Kurram and North and South Waziristan. The territories closely resemble a colony with the tribesmen deprived of even basic civil and political rights. Normal Pakistani laws do not apply there and all powers rest with a centrally-appointed Political Agent, who wields extraordinary authority over his subjects. He could jail any tribesman without trial and could impose collective punishments on the entire tribe.

This oppressive system of administration has largely been the cause for the social and economic backwardness and lawlessness of the region. Less than 30 percent of the tribesmen attend school, while 90 percent drop out before completing their education. With little economic activity, most people live on smuggling, gunrunning or drug trafficking.

The resulting pervasive poverty has also been a factor for the tribesmen joining Al-Qaeda and other militant groups.

It is not only ideological bonds and sympathy that helped Al-Qaeda buy the support of the tribesmen, but also money – the people are poor and easily lured by it. In an area where there is no other employment, the influx of Al-Qaeda money was just one more way by which tribesmen gained influence.

Since 2004 Pakistan has carried out several military operations in the territories and most of them ended in failure. The tribesmen considered the military action to be an attack on their autonomy and an attempt to subjugate them. The military offensive against Al-Qaeda militants turned into an undeclared war between the Pakistani military and the rebel tribesmen.

A major challenge for the Pakistani government and the military is to enforce their control over the lawless territories. But military action alone does not offer a long-term solution to the complex problem. Pakistan needs to take urgent measures to end the alienation and backwardness of the tribal region as well. The ongoing military operation provides an opportunity to push for the long-delayed integration of the region with rest of the country, ending its ambiguous semi- autonomous status.

Could Trade Be The Answer?

The prevailing century-old oppressive administrative system has outlived its utility and there is a need to bring FATA into Pakistan's mainstream. This involves doing away with the present federally-controlled administrative system and extending Pakistan's legal framework to the territories. It also requires Islamabad both to foster a sense of political rights and responsibility within the region and to make massive investments there in human and infrastructural development. For example, the development of road networks would help end the economic isolation of the territories and connect them with other parts of Pakistan as well as with Afghanistan. This would not only boost trade between the two countries, but also bring prosperity to the region.

Pakistan's bilateral trade with Afghanistan now surpasses 2 billion dollars a year (with Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan spiraling up to 1.2 billion dollars). The development of highways connecting the two countries could increase economic and trade opportunities for them as well.

Afghanistan is dependent on Pakistan for trade. The Afghan Transit Trade Agreement allows Afghanistan to import goods free of duty through the Pakistani port of Karachi, which is key to Afghanistan's economy. Pakistan is also the largest exporter to Afghanistan.

The end of militancy in the FATA would also help stabilise Afghanistan and create an economic boom for Pakistani exports of goods and services there. It would also help materialise long-pending plans to develop an export processing zone along the Pakistan-Afghan borders.

A stable and peaceful Afghanistan could also materialise the long-term vision of building a pipeline that would transport Central Asian energy to markets in South Asia. The Afghan peace dividend is a vital marker for the entire region.

Conclusions: The Way Forward

For Afghan peace efforts to succeed, it is imperative to bridge the widening trust gap among Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States. The cooperation among them is critical to the efforts to stabilise Afghanistan.

The hostility between Iran and the United States, and Iran's reservations about peace talks with the Pakistan-supported Taliban are other complicated fault lines acting as "spoilers" for regional stability. A major challenge for the Western alliance is therefore how to bring Tehran on board as tension between Washington and Tehran intensifies. Tehran is reluctant to support any political solution which gives a predominant role to the Taliban.

Similarly, the opposition from both China and Russia to the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 is another issue obstructing regional cooperation on the Afghan end game and needs to be resolved.

Measures are also needed to prevent Afghanistan becoming the centre of a new proxy war between India and Pakistan. For resolution of their competing security interests, the two South Asian countries need to engage seriously on a bilateral basis. The US and other Western powers should also play their role in conflict resolution. Improvement in Pakistan-India relations would have the most positive influence on the Afghan peace efforts.

Pakistan's legitimate security concerns have to be addressed for an orderly transition in Afghanistan. But Islamabad also has to dispel the impression that it is pushing for installation of a "Pakistan-friendly" government in Kabul. Such an ambition could be disastrous for regional stability.

Some of Islamabad's concerns about Pashtun revolt spreading to its borders may be valid, but it does not in any way justify it acting as a spokesman for the Pashtun population in Afghanistan, or for that matter the Afghan Taliban.

Pakistan has a critical role in helping reconciliation in Afghanistan, but it cannot and should not be expected to talk on behalf of any insurgent group. Pakistan can play the role of facilitator for talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, but it would be a grave mistake on its part to become a party to the ethnic divide in Afghanistan.

It is also important that Kabul must not reopen the issue of the Durand Line and should respect it as an international boundary. This border needs to be better controlled, so as not to allow either side to be used as a sanctuary for the other side's insurgents. The settlement of the border issue could remove a major source of conflict between Afghanistan and

Pakistan and help build the trust that is essential for the Afghan peace process and for regional stability.

Afghanistan must not get entangled in Pakistan's Baloch insurgency and allow its territory to be used for cross-border activities. The alleged cooperation between Afghan and Indian intelligence in support of Baloch separatists has contributed in fueling mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad.

Stability in Afghanistan is critical for peace in the region, but much more so for Pakistan which has been directly affected by the 10-year-long war spilling over to its territory. Pakistan must not allow Afghan insurgents to use its territory as a safe haven, or for cross-border attacks. The use of the Taliban by Islamabad to turn the situation in Afghanistan in its favour would not only keep the region in turmoil, but in turn would hurt Pakistan the most, as its military is engaged in a bloody war against its own militants.

The rise of militancy and violent extremism in Pakistan is a serious threat - not only to the country's own internal security - but also to regional stability. The policy of appeasement and ambivalence in cracking down on some extremist groups has turned the country into a training ground for Islamic radicals from across the world. The spread of extremist violence also carries huge consequences for the country's economic stability.

Pakistani civil and military leadership needs to formulate an overarching strategy to combat rising militancy, which is critical for the country's economic and social progress, as well as international security.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan would open vast economic and trade opportunities for the entire region and beyond. A stable Afghanistan could resume its central role of a land bridge connecting South Asia, the Middle East, Far East and Central Asia, bringing immense economic and trade benefits to the region. The revival of the old Silk Road trading route would help the fast transit of goods and also bring economic prosperity to Afghanistan. It could also make possible electricity transmission and natural gas supply from Central Asia to India and Pakistan.

Similarly, the construction of railroads and highways linking South Asia, Iran, China and Central Asia could contribute immensely to the development of the region. It would also help to tap Afghanistan's huge mineral resources. Currently Afghanistan's economy is completely dependent on foreign aid, which constitutes 50 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). For the development of a sustainable economy, Afghanistan would need to develop its own resources and this could only be possible with regional cooperation. Three decades of wars and the consequent instability of Afghanistan has left its massive underground mineral resources untapped. But over the last few years the exploration of mineral wealth in Afghanistan has started attracting billions of dollars of foreign investments. That has created further incentive for regional cooperation towards peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Additionally, common objectives such as combating terrorism, narcotics and organised crime require closer regional cooperation. The rise of militancy and violent extremism threatens the entire region and hence there is a need for an effective regional mechanism to fight it.

Afterword

Peace and stability eludes Afghanistan as most of the coalition forces have left the strife torn country. 2015 was the bloodiest since the 2001 US invasion. The Taliban has extended the fighting to the northern provinces, which have never been their stronghold. Meanwhile, confusion and uncertainty surround the resumption of direct talks between the Kabul government and the insurgents.

Surely the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) made up of top officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China, have been able to draw up some kind of a road map for peace negotiations. But that does not seem enough to get the process started. There is still a lot of ground to cover before one can expect the warring sides to engage in more serious and substantive negotiations on the future of the strife-torn country.

China's growing involvement in Afghan peace efforts has certainly been a very positive influence. One major contribution of the QCG is that it has helped in the improvement of bilateral relations between Islamabad and Kabul that had nosedived in 2015 after the second round of the Murree talks were cancelled following the news of the death of Mullah Omar. Certainly, relations between the two countries are critical for the peace initiative to work. Still, there are sources of tension and distrust that continue to cast a long shadow over the process.

Although Pakistani and Afghan leaders have agreed to resume the reconciliation process in Afghanistan, it will not be easy to bring the suspended talks back on track. Buoyed by their advances in northern Afghanistan and consolidation of their area of influence in the south and the west, the Afghan Taliban seem to have hardened their position on the talks too.

Zahid Hussain
2016